

Diplomatic Reflections on the Myanmar Uprising, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Generals

by James Trottier

“Far away from the centres of global power and international media, wedged in between India, Bangladesh, China and Thailand, lies the fascinating, culturally rich country of Burma (Myanmar to its long-time military rulers) where an epic drama has played out for decades between a stubborn, authoritarian and entrenched military caste and the democracy movement led by a legendary, charismatic and strong-willed woman, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.”



JAMES TROTTER, served as Political Counsellor to Myanmar. He headed the political/economic programs at Canadian embassies in Bangkok, Seoul and Manila and served at the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN in New York. He is a Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and appears regularly on expert panels and in media regarding Myanmar and North Korea.

THIS WAS THE OPENING PARAGRAPH of an article entitled “Waiting for the Lady” I wrote in **bout de papier** in 2004 on Myanmar and my meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi. Though written 17 years ago, it would not be out of place today. That itself is a sad commentary on an enduring and ongoing tragedy.

I met with Aung San Suu Kyi regularly in one-on-one meetings while serving as Political/Economic Counsellor at the Canadian Embassy in Bangkok, accredited to Myanmar as well as Thailand and Laos from 1998 to 2003. I also served as Chargé d’affaires to Myanmar, as we did not have an Embassy in Myanmar at that time.

Sometimes for extended periods, the military would not allow her to meet with anyone. When such meetings were allowed, I met Ms. Suu Kyi at her residence when she was under house arrest. After her release from house arrest on May 6, 2002, we would meet either at her residence or at National League for Democracy (NLD) party headquarters. The meetings were arranged beforehand through one of her trusted aides. As a matter of policy, I, like other diplomats, did not inform the Government in advance of my meetings with her, although they were well aware of any such meeting.

When she was under house arrest, I would drive in a hotel car to the roadblock blocking access to her lakeside house at 54 University Avenue, Yangon. The barrier was manned by military and plainclothes security personnel. I would identify myself as a Canadian diplomat going to see Aung San Suu Kyi. There would then ensue urgent conversations into walkie-talkies, checks and rechecks of my diplomatic passport, and photos taken of myself and my car. Following a delay of up to 40 minutes, I would be allowed to proceed to the next checkpoint and then, 40 metres further, to the gated compound where she lived. The gate would be opened, and I would drive down a short driveway to her house on the shore of Inya Lake.

An attendant would then show me into a sparsely furnished sitting room with a window seat, a small table and an Andy Warhol-like painting of her father. On other occasions, I would meet her in another room, furnished with a wooden table, a wooden bench, a few chairs, a desk, a TV, a VCR and some photos of her late husband, her deceased parents and her children. After a short delay, Ms. Suu Kyi would come in alone, always looking composed and dressed in a Burmese sarong, black hair tied back with jasmine flowers.

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My last meeting with her was on May 5, 2003 at her party headquarters. She got up periodically during the meeting in the rather hot room and banged on an ineffective air conditioning unit with her hand. This was more for my own comfort than her own, as she always looked cool. The room was also furnished with a telephone on which she would receive calls from world leaders; the telephone could only be used for incoming calls. Her own house did not have a working phone at that time, although, curiously, she continued to be listed in the Yangon phone book during her many years of detention.

I did not know at the time that our May 5, 2003 meeting would be our last, nor that I would be the last diplomat to meet her for well over a year. Immediately after our meeting, she set out with a caravan of supporters on a tour of the countryside, where she was met by rapturous crowds. This proved too much for the junta, which organized a vicious attack on her convoy by released convicts on May 30, 2003. Many of her supporters were killed or injured. She was arrested and put into detention again with no access to visitors.

Mark Twain said that while history doesn't repeat itself, it often rhymes. This is certainly the case in Myanmar. There is a continuum in Myanmar, stretching back to the first coup against a civilian government in 1958 through the enduring coup of 1962 and forward to the military junta in power today. Until 1988, the Myanmar military pursued their self-proclaimed "Burmese Road to Socialism," which, to paraphrase the saying about the Holy Roman Empire, was neither a road nor socialism nor particularly Burmese. In 1988, in the face of a popular uprising and the rise of Aung San Suu Kyi, came a changing of the military guard. Gone was the "Road to Socialism." But remaining with a different but familiar face was military autocracy with a penchant for numerology, which would result in a decision to change the currency to make money divisible by 9 rather than 10, thereby wiping out the savings of millions of citizens in the process. Numerology would also factor into determining the exact minute and hour of the transfer of thousands of civil servants to the new capital of Naypyidaw in 2005.

Another definite sign of the continuum is the repression of any opposition, which stretches from the earliest days of military rule through to the present. The military violently suppressed protesters with lethal force in 1962, 1974, 1975 and 1976, in the mass uprising of 1988, in the Saffron Revolution of 2007 and in the 2021 mass protests against military rule. Tragically, the Myanmar military have never shown any hesitation in gunning down protestors. In the past, there were also thousands of political prisoners, as is the case today.

Another aspect of continuity is the vicious military campaign against ethnic rebel forces that the military have waged for decades, using torture, rape and murder

as instruments of their campaign. Among ethnic groups, the Rohingya, persecuted for their religion and their ethnic background, have suffered some of the worst atrocities.

The main difference from 1988 onwards was the arrival on the scene and the enduring presence of Aung San Suu Kyi. There is a continuum between the Aung San Suu Kyi of 1988 and the political leader of today, as well as between the military's unrelenting effort to shut her down and diminish her enduring popularity with the masses then and their efforts today.

In 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Myanmar from the UK, where she had been living the quiet life of the wife of an Oxford don; she came back to Myanmar to nurse her aged and ill mother. Her return coincided with the uprising of 1988, and she was caught up in the hopes and excitement of the protest movement against the military. Ms. Suu Kyi first rose to prominence almost haphazardly; because she was her father's daughter, she was asked to speak at political rallies. Her father, Aung San, was and remains a revered figure in Myanmar, having been both the independence leader and founder of the Myanmar army. People who had known her father were struck in 1988 by the resemblance between her speaking manner and the tone of her voice and his. It did not take long for her to be recognized as a force to be reckoned with in her own right. She was nobody's proxy. She was definitely her own woman, and in the words of Margaret Thatcher: "The Lady's not for turning."

She herself has no memories of her father, as he was gunned down by rebels six months before independence, while leading a meeting of the Governor's Executive Council in July 1947, when she was an infant.

In my first meeting with her, in some preliminary small talk, I mentioned reading the memoirs of a UN official who had served in Myanmar as a British official during her father's era. That official had met the young Aung San Suu Kyi when the latter was working as a junior staffer at the UN in New York in 1969. The young woman had asked the official what her father had been like; he replied that Aung San resembled, in looks and mannerism, the actor Yul Brynner in the King and I; Ms. Suu Kyi had replied that that was what her mother had said as well. She laughed when I told her the story and recalled the conversation with the UN official some 30 years before. She also asked, "Should I be mother?" as she poured us tea.

Such moments of levity were unusual in my encounters with her. She was invariably very disciplined and always focussed on business. She was always well-informed (she regularly listened to shortwave broadcasts of BBC and Radio India) and expected her interlocutors to know their files, her policy pronouncements and the history of her country. Woe to the person who came to a meeting unprepared, as reportedly happened to at least one of my diplomatic colleagues. She did not suffer fools gladly. She had long ago set her course, sacrificed enormously in her personal life on behalf of her people and would not be diverted from her path. She was and is the very

personification of resilience. Setbacks just make her more determined.

Our meetings provided the opportunity to express Canada's support for the democracy movement and get her views on how Canada and like-minded countries could best assist. She also provided her ever astute analysis of developments in Myanmar.

She was opaque regarding her own on-again, off-again discussions with military junta representatives. She entered into talks with the military when they were willing to do so, as she knew that the only realistic route forward was to reach some sort of accommodation with the military. But she was not naive regarding the military's intentions or objectives.

She had a clear and enduring vision for a democratic Myanmar but was vague on how ethnic minorities would be accommodated. While she was willing to discuss her vision with third parties, interlocutors needed to be well-informed and knowledgeable. She did not appreciate commentary from people who did not share her vision. Nor did she welcome what she considered ill-informed comments from those outside Myanmar whom she believed did not understand the reality of Myanmar and the enormity of the challenges she faced.

Who else but a person of such iron will, determination and vision could have faced off against the might of the Myanmar army for more than 30 years, endured long periods of house arrest and personal attacks, and retained the support of the population?

However, the very strengths and qualities that had allowed her to endure may have also sown the seeds of the

greatest and most damaging controversy of her career, namely her role in the Rohingya situation, where she was caught in an iron triangle made up of the military persecution of the Rohingya, the immense animosity towards the Rohingya among the Burmese population and her own personality. Using its monopoly over the state's security apparatus to attack the Rohingya, the military left Ms. Suu Kyi with a stark choice between supporting the Rohingya, staying silent or, even worse, denying the accusations against the military.

She believed that to support the Rohingya would lose her the support of the Burmese population and lead directly to a military victory in the next Presidential election. To stay silent would suggest that she was not in control of the government she nominally headed. Although this was actually the case, this was not a course her pride would allow her to accept.

Instead, to the dismay of the international community, she chose to deny the well-documented accusations against the military and lead the defence at the International Court of Justice. As I noted in a *Globe and Mail* op-ed on February 1, 2021, the vilification she received internationally for her choice was in proportion to the international adulation she had previously enjoyed but had not sought. She was truly "a fallen angel."

I imagine that she dismissed the international criticism. She did not believe the outside world appreciated how

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The author and Aung San Suu Kyi standing in front of a portrait of her father during her house arrest in Yangon.

precarious her situation was and what the military were capable of doing to her, to her party and to the democratic aspirations of the Burmese people. In her mind, international critics did not understand Myanmar as she did.

One can only imagine the gleefulness with which the military greeted the international opprobrium which rained down on her head as a result of her decision. For decades they had sought to discredit her, diminish her and destroy her politically. They had never intended to share real power with her. Her entry into government was simply a ruse to

fend off international pressure. They were always waiting for the moment to permanently sideline her. Now they believed they had set the perfect trap for her.

In any case, the Faustian bargain she had made did not save her from the wrath of the military. With her international reputation in tatters, the military launched their coup of February 1, 2021. The immediate triggers were the results of the November 2020 election, in which her party had won 83 per cent of votes cast, and the military's concern that she would use her strengthened electoral mandate to move against the military's constitutionally protected role in the parliament and the state. However, their long-term goal had always been to remove her from the political scene permanently.

Ironically, in removing her from office, the generals revealed to the world the reality and ferocity of military power and intentions, while validating her assessment of the balance of power between her and the military. In doing so, the military probably provided her with the only means to redeem at least some of her international reputation. Without supporting the position she took regarding the Rohingya, there is now a greater understanding internationally as to why she made the decisions she made. Now, once again, she is recognized as the leader of a democracy movement, facing off with amazing courage against a ruthless and armed military employing deadly force.

For its part, the military did not anticipate that their coup would partially rehabilitate the international reputation of their greatest foe. Nor did they expect the widespread protests, strikes and resistance to their coup – the longest and most formidable popular uprising that they have ever faced.

At the time of writing, the outcome in Myanmar remains unclear. I am confident, however, that Aung San Suu Kyi will remain resolute, determined and resilient whatever the pressure put on her by the ruthless regime in power. I also believe that the people of Myanmar will continue to support her and the democracy movement. What is less clear is whether Canada and like-minded states will take effective action against the Junta, or whether they will stand by, if not indifferent then ineffective, and let Myanmar burn while its citizens die in the street for freedom and democracy. [bcp](#)

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There is a climate of fear but within this climate of fear I'm very proud to say there are many, many brave people... they're committed enough to carry on with their work, in spite of their fear. Those are the really courageous ones and I'm very proud of them."

– Aung San Suu Kyi, 2000